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To Protect Their Privacy

(The Christian Science Monitor)

Government workers and job applicants have been asked by federal agencies all sorts of questions about their private lives and opinions—their religion and religious beliefs, race, national origin, family relationships, sexual matters, finances, and outside activities.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D) of North Carolina, along with 54 bipartisan cosponsors, introduced legislation forbidding government agencies to require or request current or prospective federal employees to disclose this kind of information about their private lives.

Senator Ervin and his subcommittee on constitutional rights had previously heard extensive testimony complaining that federal government personnel procedures violated personal privacy. They concluded that government has been gathering and filing personal information much of which has little or nothing to do with a person's ability or qualifications.

The bill, soon due for Senate floor debate, exempts from its provisions only employees of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It makes special provision for the Central Intelligence Agency, but these are both seeking the same status as the FBI.

With technical advances making it much easier to gather, store, and widely disseminate personnel information, it is all the more important that Congress pass this "bill of rights for federal employees." The rights which this bill would protect are implicit in the Constitution of the United States.

But specific legislation is needed to erase any doubt whether a man, by accepting employment with the federal government, thereby bargains away these rights. Some government agencies, judging by their questionnaires and their psychological and polygraph tests, have apparently assumed that he does. Passage of this legislation will make it plain that he does not.

Senator Ervin put it more dramatically when he declared that this bill is based on the premise "that a man who works for the federal government sells his services, not his soul."

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